

## **All Through the Night** by **FiveFootTwo**

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**Summary:** Post Season 3. Mike and El try to cope with the distance between them.

## 1. Love Letters

The shrill ring of the Wheeler's home telephone startles Karen awake. She glances at the clock as she reaches for the phone, 3:09AM.

"Hello?" she asks warily.

"Hi Mrs. Wheeler. I'm sorry to wake you. This is El, can I talk to Mike?" says quiet voice on the other line.

"El? Are you ok? It's the middle of the night, sweetie," Karen replies.

"I had a nightmare. I just want to make sure Mike is ok," El responds, the panic evident in her voice.

"Ok, it's ok honey, I'll get him," Karen tells her, before placing the handset on her nightstand and padding down the hallway to Mike's room. "Mike?" she whispers, shaking her son. "El is on the phone for you."

"El?" Mike says groggily before his eyes shot open, "El? Is she ok? Is she hurt?" he leaps out of bed and ran downstairs to the kitchen telephone.

"El?" he whispers frantically into the phone, "What's wrong? Are you ok?" The couple waits until they hear the clicking sound of Mrs. Wheeler hanging up before El responds.

"Had a nightmare," she tells him. "You were...gone. I couldn't find you. I needed to know that you were ok."

"I'm ok, El. I promise," he assures her. There was a pause before he continues, "Have you been having nightmares again?"

"Yes," she responds quietly. "I didn't want to wake you."

"Don't worry about that," he tells her, "I want you to know that you're safe, that I'm safe, ok? I don't care what time it is."

"But your parents.." El begins.

"I'll deal with them," Mike interrupts her. "You're what's most important to me, remember?"

"I remember," she replies quietly, a hint of a smile evident in her voice.

"Do you think you can go back to sleep now?" he asks.

"Yes," she answers.

"I wish I were there to hold you," he admits.

"Me too," she responds, and his heart clenches at the sorrow in her voice. "Thank you, Mike," she adds.

"Anytime, El. Goodnight," he whispers.

"Goodnight," she replies before hanging up the phone.

*I love you.*

The sentiment hangs in the air, unspoken.

Mike wearily climbs the steps back to his room, flopping back into bed with a sinking feeling in his chest. Sometimes he misses her so much he feels like he cannot breathe, as if something heavy is sitting on his chest. He keeps telling himself that it isn't as bad as the 353 days he spent not knowing if she was alive or dead, and he survived that. Surely he can survive a little distance, right?

But at times like these, it doesn't feel like it at all.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-

"Mike! She's called every night for the past ten days in a row!" Karen paces around the kitchen, getting breakfast ready for her family. "Your father and I are exhausted. You need to tell her to stop calling you in the middle of the night. Can't Joyce or Will help her with her nightmares?"

"Mom, I'm not going to tell her to stop calling, she needs me," Mike snaps, the anger evident in his voice. "After all she's been through,

I'm not going to tell her no. I need to be there for her, as much as possible, ok?"

Karen sighs heavily. "Honey, I think it's wonderful how much you care about El and that you want to be a good friend to her."

"Boyfriend," Mike corrects.

"Boyfriend," Karen amends, "But she's going to have to find a way to cope without you being there every minute. You both need to find a way to handle the distance, because it sucks, but it's the way things are right now."

Mike frowns, "I know," he tells his mother, "But I can't turn my back on her now. She's just lost her father. She's had to move away from the only home she's ever known. Is there some way to compromise here?"

Karen thinks for a moment. "You said Dustin has a radio that you can call her on your walkie, right?"

"Yes, but you have to walk to it, and it's at the highest point in Hawkins," Mike confirms.

"Well, is there a way to maybe attach it to the roof or something? Like an antenna?" she wonders. "Then maybe El could call you and it wouldn't have to wake up the entire house."

"Mom, that's brilliant!" Mike jumps up, hugging her before he runs off to call Dustin.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-

When El calls that night, he can hear the fear in her voice, and his heart breaks. "I wish there was something I could do," he tells her.

"My powers...they're gone," she whispers, "I keep wanting to use the void, to check on you, spy," she admits. "Then I wouldn't have to wake you."

"I don't mind, really. And I know your powers will come back," he tries to reassure her.

"But what if they don't? And the gate is reopened? I can't help anyone anymore. I can't protect you," she begins to shake.

"El," he says firmly, "You've saved me more times than I can count. Please, for once, let me protect you."

"You saved me too," she responds.

"Please, El. Tell me what I can do to make things better for you. So that you know I'm with you, always."

"Dad...Hopper...he wrote me a letter," she tells him.

"He did?" Mike answers, surprised. "What did it say?"

"Things about his feelings, his heart. And it's mine now, forever. I can read it whenever I want. When I miss him I just take it out and read," she tries to explain, faltering.

"Oh," he pauses, thinking. "Would you like me to write you letters?"

"Yes," she answers. "But I can't...I don't know if I can...write back."

"It's ok," he replies. "You can just tell me what you think when you get them."

"Thank you," she smiles.

"Dustin is working on putting a version of Cerebro on my house, and when we figure it out maybe we can build you a receiver, too," he explains.

"Good," she answers, before bidding him goodnight.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-

Mike paces around his room, staring at the pen and paper mocking him on his desk. "A letter? Why did I agree to this?" he exclaims to himself before he plops himself down into his chair, picks up the pen, and begins to write.

*Dear El,*

*I think this is the only letter I've ever written anyone, besides the thank you notes my mom makes me write for presents I've gotten. But I'm going to try to write letters, for you, because as you know I would do anything for you.*

*I'm sorry I was such a wasteoid this summer. I feel like we wasted so much time that we could have had together if I hadn't been such an asshole. It's just that I've never felt this way about anyone before, and I didn't really understand it. Honestly, I was, and am, kind of afraid of the way that I feel about you.*

*I love you, El. I know that you heard me that day. I'm sorry that I was too afraid to say it out loud myself. It's just that you're so amazing, and beautiful, and sometimes I find it hard to believe that you could ever love me back. Part of me is always going to believe that you deserve better than a wasteoid like me. And part of me is afraid that I'm going to lose you, probably because I already have once, for 353 days. We're so young, and we don't know what the future will bring, but I want you to know that you have my heart, always. I promise.*

*Love, Mike*

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

"El? Are you ok?" he says into the phone a few nights later.

"Say it," she replies, a smile evident in her voice.

"Say what?" he questions, confused.

"Your letter, it came today," she clarifies. "Tell me, Mike."

Realization dawns on him like a ton of bricks, "Oh," he responds, fully understanding her meaning. He pauses, bracing himself. "I love you, El."

"I love you too, Mike," she replies immediately, sounding happy.

"I wish I had told you earlier," he explains, "It's just that I didn't want to scare you."

"Scare me? Why would that scare me?" she wonders.

"I don't know, because we're so young and it's such a big word, you know? And what if you didn't feel the same as me, and then..."

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"I do feel the same way," she states.

He laughs, for what feels like the first time in a long time, "I know that now," he clarifies, "But I didn't know that for sure, then."

"Isn't it obvious?" she asks, "That's what Max says, anyway."

"Obvious that we love each other?" he questions, "Yes, I suppose it is."

She giggles, and the sound is music to his ears.

"Mike?" she asks after a moment.

"Yeah?" he replies.

"If I never get my powers back, will you still love me?" her voice is so quiet Mike can barely hear her.

"Are you kidding me? Of course I will!" Mike exclaims. And as they hang up for the night, he suddenly knows the topic of his next letter to El.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

*Dear El,*

*You asked if I would still love you if your powers never come back. The answer is yes, of course I will, because I don't love you because of your powers, I love you because you're you.*

*I love you because you make me feel safe and understood in a way I never have before.*

*I love you because you make me laugh, smile, and feel so happy I think I might burst.*

*I love you because you're kind, smart, and fiercely brave. You are the strongest person I know, and not because of your powers, but because of everything you've endured and overcome.*

*I love you because you're the most amazing person I've ever known. The way that you love and protect your friends and family, your loyalty to all of us, and your never wavering willingness to help others is remarkable.*

*I love you because you are one of the smartest people that I know. You have learned so much, so quickly, and you don't give yourself enough credit for how smart you are.*

*I love you because when I'm with you, I feel like I can do anything. I feel like I am the version of myself that you see when you look at me. You make me better.*

*I love you because you are the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. I love your eyes, your smile, your laugh. Everything about you.*

*I love your sense of humor, and that you know how to have fun.*

*I love how we don't have to even use words to know what the other is thinking. We just know. We are soulmates.*

*I love you, El Hopper, because you are you.*

*Love, Mike*

*-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-*

"Do you really think I'm beautiful?" she asks a few nights later.

"Yes of course," he answers. "You know this, El. I tell you all the time."

"You do," she agrees.

"Mike, you're beautiful too," she tells him.

"Psssh, no I'm not," he laughs.

"You are to me," she states, firmly.



"Thanks," he whispers, blushing on his end of the phone.

"Thank you for the letters," she says, "I keep them under my pillow."

"You're welcome," he says, "I'm glad they are helping you."

"They are," replies. "I want to write back, and I will."

"It's ok, you don't have to," he answers. "So how do you like your new house? Have you guys made any new friends yet?"

"It's nice. We met a few friends. "Matt and Sam. They're brothers who live down the street."

"Oh, that's cool, how old are they?" he asks.

"16 and 15," she answers. "They're really nice. Will has been playing video games with them sometimes. And they talk to me."

Mike's heart sinks a little. He's sure at least one of them probably likes her, because, who wouldn't? But since he doesn't want to sound jealous or petty on the phone and make her feel bad, he says instead, "Oh, that's great. I'm glad you are making friends."

"Thanks," she answers.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

*Dear El,*

*I'm so glad to hear that you are making new friends. As much as I love you, I don't want to hold you back. It's hard, because I'm not there with you. I don't want you to miss out on anything in your new town. So I guess what I'm saying is, if you want to go out with other guys, or just meet new people, then do it. Don't hold back because of me.*

*I love you, and I just want you to be happy, no matter what. I know that other guys are going to be interested in you, because you are perfect and beautiful and amazing. No matter what happens, I'll always be here for you, no matter what.*

*Love, Mike*

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

"Do you really think I want to go out with Matt or Sam?" she asks him a few days later.

"Well...no..." Mike stutters, unsure of how to answer.

"I don't like them like that, we're just friends," she replies.

"Ok, that's um...good," he answers.

"Mike," she says his name in that familiar, soft way that makes his heart skip a beat.

"Yeah?" he asks.

"Stop being such a wasteoid," she states.

He laughs, grinning ear to ear, "Deal," he agrees, loving her even more.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

*Dear Mike,*

*I'm not sure what to say other than thank you. Thank you for saving me that night in the woods. You keep saying that I saved you, but you saved me. You gave me a home, a family, friends, a life. You gave me love. You gave me a name.*

*Yes, I'm meeting new people. I'm sure you are too. But none of them will ever mean as much to me as you do. We have been through too much together. We are soulmates, like you said (I had to look up that word in the dictionary, but I agree with you). Nothing will ever change that.*

*I love you, Michael Wheeler. You are the best person I know. I feel the most safe when I am with you. You are the person I call and reach for in the night. You are smart, funny, and so handsome. And if I am brave, it is because you've given me something worth fighting for. You are my family. You are my home.*

*I love you, Mike.*

*Love, El*

## 2. Stay

Mike clutches El's letter to his chest after reading it for the hundredth time. He takes several deep breaths, trying to calm the surge of emotions that flood through him. His Supercom surges to life, Lucas's voice breaking him out of his reverie.

"Mike, do you copy?"

"Yeah, I copy, what's going on?" Mike asks.

"Dustin and I are outside your house. We've been knocking for like, 10 minutes. Will you let us in already?" Lucas says.

"Yeah man, sorry," Mike replies, descending the stairs quickly, the letter still in his grasp. He flings open the door to reveal his friends.

"What took you so long?" Dustin demands as they brush past Mike and head towards the basement.

"Sorry, I've just got a lot on my mind," Mike replies absentmindedly.

"Did you forget that we were supposed to work on building you a Cerebro so that you can talk all lovey dovey to El twenty-four, seven?" Dustin teases.

"No, I didn't forget," Mike scowls at Dustin.

"What's that?" Lucas asks, gesturing to the paper Mike won't seem to release.

"Oh, this?" Mike replies, suddenly realizing he's still holding El's letter. "It's just a letter from El."

"A *love* letter?" Dustin mocks.

"Yes, actually," Mike blushes. "And it's private, you assholes."

"Geez, relax," Lucas responds. "It's not like we want to read it. I'd like to keep my lunch in my stomach, thank you very much."

Dustin laughs, "Yeah, I second that."

Mike flips them off as he heads upstairs to safely store the letter before returning to his friends. They get to work on building the radio that will allow Mike to talk to El from a long distance away.

"So what's it like?" Dustin asks after a while.

"What's what like?" Lucas answers.

"Being in love," Dustin amends.

"How should I know?" Lucas replies. "Ask him," he says, gesturing to Mike.

The two boys look expectantly at Mike, who reddens slightly in turn.

"I don't know how to explain it. It's just a feeling," Mike begins. "It's like, you know those cheesy songs our parents are always listening to?" The boys nod, "It's like I get what they are singing about. It's the way that I feel about El. Like she's everything to me. My whole heart."

"Whoa," Dustin says. "I mean, I like Suzie, and I really care about her. But love? That's major."

"Yeah," Lucas agrees. "Same with me and Max. I'm not sure we're ready for the L word yet. But with you guys it's been like that from day one. It was obvious."

"You think so?" Mike asks.

"Well it was to me, anyway. You were crazy for her. And then when she was gone, you just disappeared. Almost like part of you went with her," he pauses, looking at Mike. "So how are you handling it, her being gone?"

Mike shakes his head, looking down, "Not good, honestly," he answers solemnly. "And El is having nightmares almost every night. She calls me in a panic. She's been through so much."

"Yeah," Lucas and Dustin nod in agreement. "So when do you think

you'll be able to see her again? Can't Nancy drive you? Doesn't she miss Jonathan too?" Dustin asks.

"Yeah, she does," Mike answers. "But she's had to work, and Jonathan is busy looking for a new job. Plus, Mom's been on Nancy's case to get ready for college."

"Tough break," Lucas pats Mike on the back. "We're here for you man."

"I know, thanks," Mike replies, as the three of them get back to work.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

El sits on her bed, rereading Mike's letters when she hears a knock at the door. "Come in," she says.

"El?" Joyce asks tentatively before entering the room and moving to sit beside her on the bed. "I just wanted to check in and see how you're doing. You've been having a lot of nightmares."

"Yes," El states plainly.

"Is there anything you want to talk about? Anything I can do to help?" Joyce asks.

"I miss Mike. And Hopper. And Max, Lucas, and Dustin. And Nancy. And even Steve," El replies.

"I know you do, sweetie," Joyce takes El's hand in hers, "I do too. But I think this move is good for everyone. I want you to feel safe. You can start fresh here, we all can."

El nods, tears beginning to fall, "I don't want to forget them."

"Oh honey," Joyce pulls her into a hug, "Moving on doesn't mean forgetting, it just means letting go of the hurt."

"But Hopper said the hurt is good. That we learn from it," El says, confused.

"I know, and he's right," Joyce nods. "I want you to feel like this is

your home, that you are safe here," Joyce tells her, thinking of Hopper. She pats El on the knee and then stands to leave.

"Joyce?" El asks tentatively.

"Yes?" Joyce replies, turning around to face her.

"I love Mike," El says matter-of-factly.

"I know you do, honey," Joyce answers, "And I know he loves you too. Do you want to talk about what that means?"

El nods, and Joyce sits down beside her once more and begins to talk.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

Max sits in her room listening to music when the phone begins to ring.

"Hello?" she says into the receiver.

"Max!" El's voice says, "I know what the good kind of screaming is now."

Max laughs, "Let me guess, Mrs. Byers gave you 'The Talk'."

"The Talk?" El asks, clearly confused.

"Yeah, the sex talk," Max clarifies.

El laughs, "Yes she did! Do you and Lucas—"

"No!" Max exclaims. "All we ever do is kiss. What about you and Mike?"

"Same," El responds. "I didn't know about anything else."

"Do you think you want to?" Max asks, "I mean, someday?"

"Someday," El admits. "I can't imagine it being with anyone other than Mike."

She says it so openly and honestly that even Max's heart clenches a

little. She doesn't always have this certainty when it comes to Lucas. And even though she loves El and considers Mike a friend, she feels a little jealous about the bond they share. "I know," she tells El quietly. "So how do you like your new house?"

"It's ok," El tells her. "I told Mike I love him," she reveals. "And he said it back on the phone. And in a letter."

"Ohh," Max realizes, "So that's why Joyce gave you the talk. So tell me, what exactly did she say?"

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

The ringing phone in the middle of the night is commonplace for Karen Wheeler, but what was different this time is the voice on the other line. "Karen?" Joyce Byers says, a hint of panic in her voice.

"Joyce? What is it? What's the matter?" Karen asks, getting quickly out of bed as to not disturb her husband.

"It's El," Joyce explains. "She started screaming, and we thought it was a nightmare, but then she just stopped. And now she's staring up at the ceiling and we can't get her to talk, or answer us, or do anything. Is it possible for you or Nancy to bring Mike here? Maybe she'll respond to him."

"Hold on, let me get him," Karen replies, rushing down the hallway to Mike's room.

"Mike, honey," Karen says, shaking him awake, "It's Joyce."

Mike takes the phone and Karen watches as all the color drains from his face as Joyce explains the situation. He grabs a piece of paper and a pen, writing down the directions to the new house. "I'll be there as soon as I can," he says, hanging up the phone.

"Mom, can you or Nancy drive me?" he asks. Karen goes to wake up Nancy, who changes and grabs her keys and is ready to leave in less than ten minutes. Karen hugs them both goodbye and watches as they drive off into the night.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-



"Can you drive faster, please!" Mike demands about an hour into the drive, his feet nervously tapping on the floor of the passenger side of the car.

"I'm going as fast as I legally can," Nancy tells him. "Look, I know you're worried about El, but I'm doing you a favor here."

"Right, like you don't miss Jonathan," Mike snaps. He frowns, "I'm sorry, Nance, I'm just really worried about her. What if the Mind Flayer somehow infiltrated her brain or something? Why isn't she answering anyone? She's had nightmares before, and she usually just calls me."

"I don't know, Mike," she says.

"I can't lose her," he whispers.

"I know, Mike. I know," Nancy replies, pushing on the accelerator pedal. "I know you love her, and you're going to help her. Just you being there is going to help."

"You really think so?" Mike asks her.

"I know so," Nancy answers. "You guys make each other better. You complete each other, or something."

"Soulmates," Mike amends.

"Soulmates," Nancy agrees. "I could tell from that first week. When you found her. And for the record, Mike. You're not the only one who cares about her. I do. We all do."

"I know," Mike nods. "I just think it's funny that I was the last to know. That I love her, you know?"

"You weren't the last to know," she corrects, "You were the last to admit it to yourself. I think you've known on some level all along. Am I right?"

"Yeah," he admits, "There's just something about her, you know? And it isn't her powers. It's her."

"I get it," Nancy says, patting his hand, "It's going to be ok, Mike."

"Everyone keeps telling me that," he replies, sadly, looking out the car window once more.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

"El? El!" Mike hovers over her, trying to meet her gaze, "It's me! Mike! I'm here!"

El doesn't blink, doesn't even register his presence. "Can you guys give me a minute alone with her, please?" he asks Nancy, Jonathan, Joyce, and Will. They all nod and leave the room quietly.

"El, listen to me," he says, sitting on the bed beside her and taking her hand, "Whatever it is, I'm here for you. I love you, more than anything. You're my world. Please, please stay with me."

He pulls her into his arms and kisses the back of her hand, her cheek, her eyelids, the tip of her nose, her lips, before settling himself beside her, his body fully pressed along the length of hers. "Please El, talk to me, come back to me, tell me what you're thinking." He presses his lips against her neck, something he'd only dreamed of doing before this moment, and burrows his head in the curve of her shoulder. He feels her stir a little.

"El?" he asks, propping himself up a little to gaze into her eyes.

"Do that again," she whispers, tears flooding her eyes. He obliges, and she sighs before completely falling apart, sobbing uncontrollably. He pulls her into his arms again.

"Tell me what happened," he whispers into her ear. "I'm here."

"I had a dream," she says finally, after a long pause, "About Hopper. And it was so nice. We were playing board games and laughing. And then suddenly, he turned into that thing, that monster. And he looked at me and said, 'This is all your fault. You let me in.' And he's right! I opened the gate! It's all my fault. Hopper is gone. Will is hurt. Billy is dead. And I'm here and you're there, and it's all my fault!" She clutches at Mike's shirt, soaking it with her tears.

"No, El," he says, trying to soothe her, "It's not your fault. Brenner made you do it." He feels her shiver at the mention of her 'Papa'. "You didn't have a choice. You didn't know. You can't blame yourself for this."

"I should stay away from you, too," she says, "I'll only end up hurting you. And I can't bear that."

"No!" he answers, "That would hurt me more than anything, El. I love you. I never want to be apart from you again. Do you hear me?"

She nods, continuing to cry. He holds her tightly, stroking her hair and kissing the top of her head while she cries.

"El, look at me," he asks, and she pulls away so that she can meet his gaze, "None of this is your fault. We are all better because of you. You saved us. If that lab didn't use you, they would have found another way to open the gate. Or the Russians would have first. Either way, it would have happened. Everyone is better because they know you. You saved Hopper. You're Max's best friend. Will, Lucas, Dustin, Mrs. Byers, Jonathan, Nancy, Steve, Robin, and my mom all care about you. I love you. We're all better because of you."

She reaches up and kisses him softly on the lips. "Stay?" she asks quietly, and he nods.

"I promise," he replies, pulling her back into his arms.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-

Joyce peers into El's room and finds her and Mike curled up together in bed, sleeping soundly. A soft smile stretches across El's face, and Joyce realizes that this is the first time that El has slept so peacefully since she started living with the Byers.

She heads to the kitchen to pick up the phone to call Karen, knowing she'll be worried about her children.

"Good morning Karen, it's Joyce," she says when Karen answers. "The kids are both here and safe, and it's ok with me if they want to stay for a day or two, if it's ok with you."

"Sure, that's fine," Karen replies, "Is El ok?"

"She is now," Joyce says, "Mike has an amazing effect on her."

"So I've heard," Karen agrees, "But can I ask you something?"

"Sure," Joyce replies.

"Why did you separate them? El and Mike? He's miserable, I can attest to that. And she doesn't sound like she's doing well either. And Nancy is also so unhappy. And as a mother I feel I have to speak up for what's best for my kids, you know?" Karen rambles nervously.

Joyce pauses, knowing that Karen doesn't know the full story of the Upside Down and the Mind Flayer and all the crazy things her children have been through. "I felt we needed a change," she answers simply. "El and Will have been through so much. And it was so painful for El to be around all of the things that reminded her of her dad."

"I get that," Karen answers, "But whether we like it or not, my son loves El, and I hate to see him suffer. He's really come alive since he's met her. It's wonderful to see, and I just want him to be happy."

"I know, and I'm sorry," Joyce answers, "But please understand I'm trying to do right by my own kids. All of them, including El."

"I understand," Karen replies. "Well, thanks for the call. Tell the kids to call me before they leave."

"Will do," Joyce says, hanging up. She sits at the kitchen table for a while, contemplating Karen's words. Is she really doing what is best for everyone?

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

El wakes slowly, feeling happier than she has in weeks. She feels a pair of arms around her and opens her eyes to reveal Mike. He pulls her closer to himself in his sleep, and she smiles, looking at his sleeping face. She curls her body back into his, running her hands down his side and around his back, rubbing over his shirt.

"Good morning," he whispers groggily, smiling at her. "Can we stay like this forever?"

"I wish," she answers softly. "Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you, for coming here, for staying with me," she tells him.

"Of course," he answers. "I would do anything for you, you know that."

"I know," she snuggles into his chest. "Mike? Joyce gave me The Talk."

She feels all the muscles in Mike's body stiffen, "Wait, what?" he questions, pulling away from her.

"Joyce," El explains, "She told me about sex. You know about it, right?"

Mike shifts nervously, "Yes, of course I do. I just figured another girl should tell you. You shouldn't learn about that stuff from your boyfriend, you know. It would be weird, and I didn't want to make you scared or uncomfortable. And I didn't want to pressure you or make you feel like you had to do anything with me. I respect you, you know?" he rambles.

"Mike," she places her fingers on his lips, silencing him, "I understand."

"Oh, good," he breathes a sigh of relief.

"Do you ever think about sex...with me?" she asks tentatively.

Mike coughs, pulling away from her slightly. "Um, well, I..." he trails off.

"Mike," she says taking his face in her hands and looking him directly in the eyes. "It's me, you don't have to be nervous. You can tell me anything."

Mike smiles, pausing to marvel at the girl in front of him, "I know," he reassures her, taking her hand and squeezing it in his palm, "Of course I have, I love you," he admits. "Have you thought about it, with me?"

"Well I only just found out about it. When we would kiss sometimes I would feel like I wanted...more," she manages, "Does that make sense?"

"Yes, absolutely," he replies. "And we'll figure that out, together. There's no need to rush it, ok?"

"Ok," she replies. "That's what Joyce said too. That we're young and we should just let things happen, naturally."

He smiles, leaning in to kiss her lips. "Naturally," he whispers, kissing her again.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

Mike and El remain in constant physical contact for the rest of the weekend, only separating to shower or to use the bathroom. They hold hands, kiss, hug, or simply lean against each other at all times, something that doesn't go unnoticed by Joyce. She can't help but smile at how El lights up in Mike's presence, all smiles and giggles as she hangs on his every word, and he on hers.

She allows Mike to sleep in El's room that night, knowing full well that if she fights it, they'll just end up sneaking after she's retired for the night. She falls into a dreamless sleep, awaking ten hours later with a start, trying to place why she feels unsettled. And then it dawns on her.

El slept the entire night without a single nightmare for the first time since Hopper died. She tiptoes down the hallway and peers into El's door, open three inches. The sight warms her heart. Mike and El are facing each other in bed, their arms around each other, and her head tucked under his chin, buried into his chest. She sighs, wondering yet again if she's made the right choice coming here.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

Eventually, it's time for Mike and Nancy to go home. Jonathan walks Nancy to the car, leaving Mike and El to say goodbye on the porch. El begins to cry as she hugs Mike.

"I don't want you to go," she pleads with him, "Please."

"I have to, I'm so sorry," he frowns, hugging her tightly. "I love you. So, so much. Always."

"I know, I love you too," she responds.

He kisses her, long and soft, their lips meeting each other over and over again.

"Mike!" Nancy calls, and they break apart, leaning their heads together so that their foreheads touch.

"I'm not going to say goodbye," Mike says, "Because this isn't a goodbye. It's just temporary. I'll see you again soon, ok?"

She nods, pressing a folded piece of paper into his palm. "Read this later, when you are alone," she tells him, smiling up at him through her tears. "It's your next letter," she explains.

He kisses her again before removing his hoodie and draping it around her shoulders. "So you can wrap me around you whenever you need it," he says, giving her a lopsided smile before turning to go.

Later, in his bedroom he carefully unfolds El's letter and begins to read.

*Dear Mike,*

*Joyce has just given me the talk. And now I feel like I finally understand the way I've been feeling about you, especially when we kiss. It's like I always want more. I just figured that meant I wanted more kissing, but now I know it means more than that.*

*I keep hearing how young we are. From Joyce, from my dad, from your mom. I know a lot of people think we're too young to feel the way we do, but I can't help it. I just want to be near you. I want you to stay, always.*

*And someday, when we're ready, I want you feel your hands and lips on my bare skin. I want to feel all of you. I want to feel the weight of your body on mine. I want to be as close to you as possible.*

*Thank you for always respecting me, for being so patient with me, for helping me to understand. You never have to be uncomfortable talking to me about things. We belong together.*

*I love you, El*

Mike's heart is pounding as he carefully folds up the letter, tucking it under his pillow with the others.

*Holy shit.*



### 3. These Dreams

Joyce wakes to the sound of screaming. El's shrill, panicked voice echoes throughout the small house, waking all its inhabitants.

"Mike!" El calls out his name repeatedly, not fully awake. She's thrashing in her bed under the covers, trying to escape in her terror.

"El!" Joyce says, shaking the girl. El's eyes open slowly, blinking to adjust to the ambient light in the room.

"Mike," El whispers, broken, looking up at her caregiver. "Is he ok? I need to call him."

"Honey, it was just a dream. Let the boy sleep. I'm sure he's just fine," Joyce says, trying to reassure her.

"I miss him," El states, looking over to the framed photos she has of herself and Mike on her nightstand. "He always gets me. I feel safe with him."

"I know," Joyce nods, stroking El's hair gently, "And I want you to feel safe here. I want to understand you, too. I'm trying."

"Thank you," El says, clearly making an effort to smile, her fingers still tightly gripping her sheet.

"Anything you ever want to talk about, I'm here," Joyce adds, trying to soothe the girl.

"Well...actually," El begins, frowning slightly.

"What is it?" Joyce asks.

"We talked about sex, and I know I'm not ready for that yet," she hears Joyce breathe a sigh of relief before she continues, "But I want Mike to know how much I love him. And I know he isn't going to push me to do more. He said so himself. So I guess I'm just wondering what to do next? To move things forward?"

Joyce hesitates before responding, so El quickly adds, "I can ask Max

if you don't want to talk about it."

"No, no, I'm glad you're talking to me," Joyce smiles, hugging El to her. "Well...have you ever heard of something called French kissing?"

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

Mike reads El's letter for what feels like the billionth time. His skin still flushes and tingles at the realization that El Hopper, the most beautiful, amazing girl he's ever seen, wants to be with him. Like, really be with him, and know him in the biblical sense. He can't believe it. He paces around his room a few more times before picking up a pen and paper and starting a letter to her in response.

*Dear El,*

*Wow.*

*I am the luckiest person on the planet, because the most beautiful, amazing girl in the world wants to be with me. So, I apologize in advance for acting stupid sometime in the future, because sometimes it's just hard for a nerd like me to believe it.*

*I'm so glad that you talked to Joyce, and that you feel comfortable talking to me about everything. I wanted to talk to you about these things, but I didn't feel like it would be right coming from me, your boyfriend. I never want you to feel uncomfortable, and I would never want you to feel pressured to do anything you're not ready for. So please, keep talking to me, and I'll keep talking to you, and we'll figure it out, together.*

*I start high school in a few days, and I'm pretty nervous about it. I guess I was really hoping to have you and Will there with me, and it's hard not to feel disappointed. But, I'm going to study really hard and do well so that one day I can get into a good college and get a good job. Then we could get a home of our own, maybe?*

*Geez, I hope you don't think I'm being creepy or a stalker or anything. I just can't picture a future without you. And more importantly, I don't want to.*

*I want you to, El. All of you. When we're ready.*

*All my love, Mike*

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

Joyce enrolls El in the local high school along with Will, and they along with the Party, begin classes during the first week of September. El's nightmares worsen that week, and more than once Joyce receives a call from the school that El has had a panic attack, or that she won't speak to anyone, and Joyce considers pulling her out and homeschooling her.

Joyce isn't sure what to do, because under normal circumstances she would arrange for El to receive counseling, but she was given specific instructions from Dr. Owens not to talk to anyone about the events of the last few years. She can tell that El is really trying to adjust and be happy, but the only time she lights up is when she's talking to Mike or reading one of his many letters. Will and Jonathan try too. But Joyce isn't quite ready to face the demons of the past yet, and she can tell that neither is Will.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

"Hello?" Mike says, his eyes still heavy from sleep.

"Hi Mike," El says, "Are you ok?"

She always begins her middle of the night calls like this, raw from a nightmare, "Yeah, I'm ok. Are you?"

"No," she replies, and his heart sinks yet again, "I felt a flicker. Like, something from the void, only when I try to access it when I'm awake, I can't."

"What do you think it is?" Mike asks. "Is it the Mind Flayer? Is he trying to harm you again?"

"No," El replies "It's something good. Like someone wants to talk to me. Do you think it's my mother?"

"It could be," Mike answers, thinking, "Do you think..." he hesitates, not wanting to upset her, "Remember when you fought the Demogorgon and you disappeared, but you weren't really gone? We

just couldn't see you?"

"Yes," El says slowly, unsure of his point.

"Do you think it could be Hopper?" he starts. "I mean, they never found his body. I know that machine was supposed to make people disintegrate or something. But there was no trace of him or anything. Maybe he just went...somewhere else."

He hears El's breathing become more rapid. "El, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean to upset you."

"You didn't," she answers, "I think it's possible. But I don't want to hope and be wrong."

"I know," Mike replies, softly. "If you get another flicker, look for signs, ok? If it's Hopper, I know he would be trying to reach you."

"Ok," she agrees. "How's high school?"

"It's ok," he begins, "We were assigned lab partners, and we have to do a whole bunch of projects together. And I really wanted to be with Lucas since he's in my class but instead I got stuck with Lisa Hewson. Dustin says she's nice because they're in the same homeroom together, but I don't know. How are you liking school?"

"It's scary," El admits.

"Scary?" Mike interrupts. "Scary how? Is someone hurting you? Bullying you?"

"No," she reassures him, "It's so many people. And they're always talking, and bumping into me, and asking questions. And I just don't..." she trails off.

"You just don't what?" he asks gently.

"I don't feel comfortable there," she says. "I think Joyce is going to teach me at home instead."

"Oh," Mike says, "That's good." El can hear the sadness in his voice. There's a pause as neither of them says anything for a beat and then,

"Your last letter was, wow," he adds, finally.

"So was yours," she replies, and he can hear the smile return to her voice.

"I miss you so much," he admits. "I wish I could just hold you right now."

"I would love that," she sighs, "I miss you too."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

She concentrates, she really does. While she is awake, she can't seem to return to the void. Her powers are either depleted or simply gone forever, and she isn't sure what to do. The following night she concentrates on picturing Hopper as she's falling asleep, flooding her subconscious with memories of him, hoping for a connection or sign of some kind.

She does this for three nights in a row before something happens. She dreams of a long, dark corridor with low, flickering lights. She rounds a corner, drawn to a nearby door. The door is solid, locked, and has a small, square window at about eye level to her. The window is filthy and looks as though covered in fingerprints and dirt. She can hear movement behind the door and a muffled voice, but she can't make out what the voice is saying. She stands on tiptoe to see through the window, and suddenly awakes, her heart pounding. She immediately picks up the phone and tells Mike what she saw.

"What did the place look like?" he asks, "Did you see anyone there?"

"It looked kind of like the lab, only darker. Dirtier," she answers. "I didn't see anyone."

"Ok," he replies. "You're doing great."

"Thanks," she responds. "So how was your day?"

He tells her about his classes and homework assignments and hears her yawning. "Go back to sleep," he tells her. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, ok?"

"Ok, I love you," she murmurs sleepily.

"I love you too," he smiles. "Goodnight."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

She's walking down the same narrow corridor. She can hear someone's voice calling to her from behind the dirty, solid door. She rounds the corner and sees the door open, and someone in a uniform walk out. She freezes in her tracks, but the man doesn't look up from his clipboard. She sneaks quietly behind him and puts her hand out, stopping the door from closing so that she can slip into the room undetected. The room is incredibly tiny, dingy, and filthy. There is no furniture and nothing hanging on the walls. She hears moaning coming from the floor and looks down. She sees Hopper, bruised and bloody, curled into himself in the corner of the room. She kneels down, reaching her hand out to his. As her hand touches his he looks her straight in the eyes. "Help me," he says.

Gasping, El sits up abruptly, shaking. It takes her a moment to realize she must have fallen asleep on the couch watching TV with Will and Jonathan when they arrived home from school and work, respectively.

"El? What is it?" Jonathan asks, moving to sit beside her.

"It's Hopper," she whispers, still shaking. "I think he's alive."

"What?" Will asks, his mouth agape.

"Mike, I need Mike," she replies, standing up and heading to her room. She throws some clothes and her Supercom into her bag. "Can you drive me to him?" she asks Jonathan, who nods. The boys grab a few things and stuff them into backpacks before heading to the car. They leave a note for Joyce on the kitchen table.

*Mom,*

*Heading to Hawkins for a visit. Will call when we get there.*

*Love, Jonathan, Will, & El*

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

Nancy opens the door and immediately envelops Jonathan and El into a hug. Will heads over to Lucas's house, knowing El and Mike will want some alone time. El is bouncing up and down with nervous energy, eager to tell Mike about her vision.

"He's in the basement doing some homework," Nancy explains, and El walks to the top of the basement steps, finding the door open. She peeks downstairs and sees Mike sitting with a very blonde, very pretty girl.

El narrows her eyes as the girl touches Mike's forearm, laughing loudly at something he said, and her heart clenches at the sight. "*He's mine*," she thinks before opening the door fully and descending the steps.

Mike becomes aware of her presence almost immediately, and he stands and turns to his female companion to introduce her, "Lisa, this is El, my—"

El places her hands on either side of Mike's face, pulling his lips down to hers. She opens her mouth against his, sliding her tongue along his lower lip before tangling it with his. Mike responds, emitting a low, guttural sound deep in his throat as the rest of his body catches up to his mouth. He places his hands on her hips, pulling her body flush against his as they deepen the kiss. Both lose track of time and space as their mouths meet, again and again, El's hands fisted in his hair, his body pressed against hers.

He pecks her lips once more before kissing the tip of her nose, her cheek, her jaw, and her neck before burying his face there, hugging her tightly. They stay like that for a moment before he leans his forehead against hers. "Girlfriend," he finishes with a smile. "Hi," he adds, his eyes sparkling as he looks at El.

"Hey," she smiles back. Lisa clears her throat, noticeably uncomfortable at witnessing their make out session. She looks at Lisa. "We're in love," she tells the girl.

"I can see that," Lisa says, quickly scooping up her books and papers.

"I'll see you Monday," she tells Mike before running up the basement steps.

Mike laughs, but El continues to look up the steps after Lisa. "What?" he asks.

"She likes you. She was flirting with you," El tells him.

"What? No way," he answers. "We're lab partners. We have to work together a lot."

El huffs in annoyance and Mike stands behind her, wrapping his arms around her. "You're the only one I love," he says, moving to kiss her neck again. He turns her around in his arms to face him, "Wait, I'm so happy you're here, but why *are* you here?"

"I had a dream about Hopper," she tells him, and explains what she saw. Mike listens attentively and then picks up his Supercom. "Let me call the rest of the Party," he tells her. "I think we all need to hear this."

After Mike talks to Lucas, Dustin, and Max, he sits down beside El on the couch. El moves to lean her head against his shoulder as she takes Mike's hand in hers, her fingers toying with the ends of his.

"That kiss," Mike says, "Wow."

"I know," she agrees. "Joyce told me how to do it."

Mike turns red, "Wait, what? Joyce told you." He grins at her, his eyes sparkling in amusement, "Well, thank her for me."

"Mike!" she giggles, smacking him playfully. He reaches out, grabbing the offending hand and pulling her onto his lap so that her head is level with his. "You want to show me again?" he whispers, raising his eyebrows suggestively, and she laughs again.

Their lips meet again, and El can feel the surge of electricity between them. She closes her eyes and concentrates only on the feeling of his lips and tongue against hers and his hands in her hair. She can feel his body responding to her and the warmth radiating through Mike. She hears the soft rumbling of satisfaction in his throat as he kisses



her deeply, pouring all of his emotion and love into the kiss. Before she realizes what is happening, she's pressed him back into the couch, his head pillowed by the cushion on the arm of the sofa. She pulls back for a moment to look into his eyes. He's breathing heavily, his pupils dark with want and amazement, like he can't quite believe that she's real.

"I'm sorry," she says suddenly.

He reaches up to tug gently on one of her loose curls. "Oh my god, for what?" he asks. "Please don't ever apologize for kissing me like that. In fact, don't ever stop," he teases, but her face grows serious.

"For breaking up with you," she says honestly, and he frowns.

"El," he looks into her eyes, "It's ok, I deserved it. I acted like a jealous, immature jerk."

"I could have lost you," El replies. "To someone like Lisa, to the Mind Flayer. You could be gone like Hopper."

"I'm here, I'm not going anywhere," Mike says, leaning his forehead against hers. "I love you. There is no one else. There never could be."

"Promise?" she asks.

"Promise," he replies, and she lowers her lips to his once more.